

You On Display...Forever

The importance of the report

Have you been to court lately, or written any reports? If you're a cop the preceding question is a rhetorical one. We can't do our jobs without memorializing most everything that we do. From parking tickets to incident reports, from traffic tickets to affidavits, we are constantly writing. Much to our dismay the bulk of our tours are sometimes spent filling out paperwork. And it doesn't matter if you're in patrol, a specialized unit, or you are an administrator, every action and/or decision needs to be reduced to writing. If only we could operate like the cops we see on



TV and the movies. They never seem to have to go into the station to do paper...

Many of our departments and agencies are trying (many times unsuccessfully) to move to a paperless organization. Everything will eventually be maintained on some distant hard drive, available 24-7 with just a few keystrokes on the computer. But whether your report is on the old reliable piece of paper, or on some electronic storage medium, you will forever be the creator of that

particular missive or report.

Knowing that your document will likely sometime in the future be the focus of a court case, or perhaps be up for review by some oversight group, you essentially have become "an author." *What? Are you kidding me...an author?* Yes, you have ownership of that particular piece of writing; your name will forever be associated with it. Understanding that will hopefully cause you to take a more serious look at the manner in which you fashion your reports, may even cause you to become more critical of the way that you fill them out.

This may have already happened to some of you, but imagine for a moment that you are called to testify at a jury trial. Your testimony is the key piece of evidence that the prosecution has, and all of your supporting documentation will be subject to examination by the defense and the jury. Are you confident that your writing skills are up to that level of scrutiny? Or in retrospect might you wish that you had been more deliberate when you wrote that particular report? Think of your document being projected on a huge screen in the courtroom for everyone to see. If you knew in advance that your report would be the subject of such scrutiny, would you spend more time on things like grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure? Of course you would.

Sometimes for the sake of brevity we tend to exclude things that we deem to be unimportant. But if you are an investigator, you know how dependant we are on that preliminary report taken by the street cop. Little things that at the time seem to be extraneous, can later turn out to be an important element of the investigation. And bear in mind that the initial report is crucial, for it is generally taken at the scene while facts and witnesses minds are fresh.

On the other hand, including too much information can have a deleterious effect as well. When a report takes on the characteristics of a novel by including information not relative to the incident, or conjecture on the part of the report taker, it becomes fair game for the defense to use as a weapon to discredit testimony and credibility. If the defense can establish a number of inconsistencies throughout a report, and they can be small inconsequential things that normally would have no impact on the outcome of the case, he can then plant that seed of doubt in the jurors' minds.

So what do we do to ensure that our report writing can stand the test of time? Let me offer the following suggestions:

- Use simple, concise sentences. Ensure that you have no fragments or run on sentences that will be confusing to anyone that may review your work
- Limit each paragraph to one point or issue. When you throw a number of incidents or unrelated facts all in the same paragraph, it becomes difficult to navigate or to extract key information from the conglomeration of words.
- Don't use words that you don't understand; don't use slang. You may have heard a word used by someone else that sounded cool, maybe a slang street term, but once you see it appear a year from now in court, it may cause you some embarrassment especially if the defense attorney asks you to explain what it means.
- Use only words that you know are spelled properly. If you are a poor speller you should be carrying a pocket dictionary. Your work is a reflection of you; don't let your reflection become one that is not the person that you'd like the world to see.
- Report what you know to be factual, not conclusions or speculation or your part.
- Don't try to impress people with your vocabulary—keep it simple. Juries would rather hear you explain to them what you saw and did in plain, everyday terms, not police jargon that sometimes becomes more distracting than useful.
- Write and complete your reports legibly. Nothing is more distracting or detracting than reading a report that looks as though it were written by a grade schooler. Conversely, if you have very beautiful handwriting that flows above and below the lines, save it for personal correspondence. Neat, legible, printed reports are the order of the day.
- Finally, before signing it and handing it in—read it. Does it make sense; does it flow? If you have difficulty understanding it as the author, every subsequent reader will have even more of a problem with it

I submit to you that your writings will in some cases have a longer life than you will. It's important that you stay focused on this all important task. And supervisors shouldn't be reluctant to give some constructive criticism when it's needed. After all if they are signing off on your work, they bear responsibility for it as well.

Be proud of your work brothers and sisters, and Stay Safe!